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## *The Politics of Green Space*

**W**HAT A DIFFERENCE a few months make when it comes to the politically barbed issue of suburban development pressures. Last summer, when they began debating whether to allow big churches to be built in Montgomery County's sprawling, bucolic agricultural reserve, local leaders spoke gingerly of the need to strike a balance between the environment and property rights. But by the time decision time rolled around this week, the delicate talk of balance had morphed into bold support for the grandeur of green space. Having clearly heard from a surfeit of voters fed up with traffic and sprawl, County Council members voted to stiff-arm the churches that had hoped to build sanctuaries amid the farmland.

No doubt Montgomery's agricultural reserve — 93,000 acres of rustic charm set aside in 1980 and comprising about a third of the county — is a treasure, increasingly so in a region that is busily paving fields. It remains the biggest chunk of unspoiled land in the metropolitan area, a refuge in the northwestern portion of the county for horses and cattle, sheep and orchards, pumpkin patches and, blessedly, comparative peace and quiet.

Understandably, county politicians wanted to keep it that way. But they also recognized the existence of a zoning exemption, as old as the reserve itself, that allowed for the possibility of some private schools, day-care centers and churches. Mindful of that exemption, a few churches planned to build new upcounty sanctuaries in the reserve. To do so, they needed public water and sewer lines extended to their properties, and for that

they needed approval from the council.

In another political season, they might have gotten it. The churches are large and growing — 2,500 congregants, in the case of one applicant, Bethel World Outreach Ministries, which has outgrown its current quarters in Silver Spring — but the council could have limited them to building on just a fraction of their land in the reserve while keeping the rest untouched or in agricultural use. The council also could have given the go-ahead to the few churches whose expansion plans are in the pipeline, then barred new building in the reserve. That would have been reasonable. But council members were faced with the public's rising hostility to fast growth, a scandal involving the disregard of development limits in Clarksburg, and the distaste for the proliferation of McMansions — to say nothing of council members' own reelection prospects next year. In such an environment, the churches didn't stand a chance.

Sadly, Bethel's pastor, Bishop Darlington G. Johnson, is accusing the council of discrimination, religious and perhaps also racial; his church is multiracial and multinational, with plenty of African-born congregants. Some other religious leaders branded the council as "anti-church." The allegations are unfair, but they demonstrate the combustibility that has marked this debate. The council, having taken the politically safe course by shutting the door to churches and other private institutions in the agricultural reserve, should explore what can be done to help accommodate them elsewhere.